

"The Men Who Built the Parks"

The Civilian Conservation Corps in Big Bend

Ranger Mary K. Manning



Wake up at 5 am. Roll call and calisthenics at 5:30 am, followed by breakfast at 6:30 am. Work all day to the sounds of picks and shovels. Lights out at 9 pm.

Was this the schedule for military troops stationed at Glenn Springs or Castolon? A prison work crew? Not quite. This was the daily routine followed by "The Men Who Built the Parks," or the Civilian Conservation Corps. While this year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of Big Bend National Park, it also marks the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the CCC in what was then called Big Bend State Park. The first CCC crew arrived in the Chisos Basin in May 1934. Local communities welcomed their arrival, as they anticipated that the improvements made in the park by these young men would bring tourist dollars to the area.

To see what the CCC accomplished here, you only have to drive into the Chisos Basin. In 1934, a primitive road led partway up to the Chisos Mountains, roughly to where mile marker 4 is today. From there, a livestock trail led the rest of the way into the Basin. Work crews moved 40,000 cubic yards of earth and 5,000 yards of solid rock, and built 17 masonry culverts, using only hand tools and a dump truck, to construct a passable road into the Basin. They built the stone cabins, now available for visitors through the park concessionaire, and laid out the Window Trail, the Lost Mine Trail, and the trails leading to the South Rim.

Who were these men who worked so hard to build our parks? Officially, they were required to be able-bodied men between the ages of 17 and 25, from families that were below a certain income level (although several younger men later admitted to lying about their age in order to get in). They took up President Franklin Roosevelt's cause to work in the state and national parks and forests across the nation, developing roads, trails, campgrounds, lodges, and other improvements to make them more accessible to the public. For this work they received \$30 per month, with \$25 of it going to their families.

The "Father" of Big Bend

Chief Naturalist David Elkowitz

Everett Townsend is credited as being the first person to suggest protecting the Big Bend area as a national park and is remembered today as "The Father of Big Bend National Park." Also credited with the park's legislative origins, Townsend had the vision to dream and the determination to work tirelessly for many years and through many setbacks before seeing his dream become a reality.

Everett Ewing Townsend was born in 1871 and moved to Texas with his parents at age 10. In 1891 he joined the Texas rangers at age 19, but overstated his age as 21 on the application. Then, in 1894 Townsend served with the U.S. Customs Service along the border. The Texas Rangers and U. S. Customs Service provided the young Townsend with unparalleled opportunities for adven-

ture, as well as a chance for exploration of the Big Bend country from horseback. Townsend would see the beauty and mystery of the Big Bend first hand and begin planning. He became enamored of the land's beauty, thus beginning a lifelong dream of seeing the Far West Texas area protected as a national park.

In 1918 Townsend was elected Brewster County Sheriff. This, combined with his previous positions of authority, led to his election as a state legislative representative in 1932. While in this capacity he and State Representative R. M. Wagstaff introduced House Bill number 771 to the 43rd Texas legislature. This bill created Texas Canyons



Most men gained more than monetary compensation, as well. Some learned valuable job skills, such as masonry and vehicle maintenance, which helped them get jobs in other places after leaving the Corps. Many camps employed teachers to work with interested young men in the evenings, helping them catch up on the education they may have missed while trying to support their families during the Depression. Several who worked in Big Bend also mentioned the good food available in camp, something they didn't have at home during those lean times. Enrollee Roscoe Bowers recalls, "They had surprisingly good food. I weighed 145 pounds when I arrived, and 175 pounds when I left!"

While they worked hard during the week, the young men also found time to enjoy their surroundings on their days off. Enrollee Roscoe Weaver remembers, "I think I climbed every mountain out there. Explored all of them...Sometimes we went swimming at the mouth of Santa Elena Canyon. There was a big deep hole, right in the mouth of the canyon." The camp kept some horses, and some of the men bought their own horses and kept them there. Weaver recalls, "We rode every chance we got." The camp also had a recreation hall with pool tables, ping pong tables, and card tables, and they sometimes showed movies.

These "Men Who Built the Parks" left an indelible mark on parks and forests across the country, and millions of people still enjoy their work today, seventy years later. The time and effort that these young men spent in these areas certainly shaped them as well. Roscoe Weaver probably echoes the sentiments of many CCC workers when he said, "I grew up in there. I went from a kid to a man, where I could hold down a job and really make it on my own...The CCC kept a lot of boys from leading criminal lives, stealing and things like that. Because it was so hard to make it (during the Depression), I think a lot of them would have done that if they hadn't gotten in the CCC...That was, I think, the best program they ever had in this country."



CCC enrollee Roscoe Bowers and his truck "Baby Buggy"

State Park – almost a decade later to be expanded into Big Bend National Park.

Townsend's contributions in the years leading up to

the creation of the national park were numerous. His early efforts included investigating water sources necessary to bring the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to the Chisos Basin. A water source of five gallons per minute was needed for the approval of the CCC camp, and Townsend's efforts with the Alpine Chamber led to the discovery of an eight gallon per minute well. This early effort secured the CCC to build roads, facilities, scientific studies and much more re-

quired for a future national park. Other contributions by Townsend included fundraising campaigns, legislative wrangling, political lobbying, VIP tours, numerous promotional efforts, and much more. Townsend was up to the task in every way, including writing a personal appeal to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) for support of the Big Bend park idea. FDR in turn wrote the Governor of Texas in support of creating the future park.

Townsend's own words perhaps speak best to the level of commitment and hope that he maintained through the many challenges to see Texas' first national park created in 1944. Townsend said, "My heart is in this project," and "I am ready to do my best no matter whether I am off or on the payroll." This Townsend would indeed do. In Townsend's final years he would serve as the park's first U.S. commissioner for the Big Bend. A fitting tribute to a person who worked so long and hard to see the park's creation.